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Understanding the lives of religious educators

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Religious Education teachers should have ‘a tremendous sense of humour and a hide like a rhinoceros’, wrote Bernard R. Youngman in 1953. The most successful author of RE textbooks in his day, Youngman was commenting on the qualities of character RE teachers needed to negotiate the lowly status of RE as a curriculum subject, and the contested nature of religion in post-war Britain.

It is interesting to revisit Youngman’s assessment of the character of the religious educator and to consider what virtues may be essential to being a good RE teacher in our time and context. This is particularly pertinent given the importance of virtue to the world’s religious traditions.

Indeed, many consider the virtues to be quasi-religious concepts. For example, in her book, *The Great Transformation*, Karen Armstrong argues that the emergence of the ‘axial virtues’ of compassion, respect, empathy and love in the period between 800 and 300 BC were vital to the development of human civilisation. The axial sages – Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jeremiah and Lao Tzu – each emphasise the moral imperatives of self-reflection, responsibility and cooperation necessary for societal flourishing.

In his famous wartime essay on education, *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis observed similarities between the teachings of these religions. Rather than backing up his argument with Christian theology alone, Lewis draws on the world’s cultures to advocate a conception of education based on universal anthropological notions of the good, which he calls ‘the Tao’ – a term taken from ancient Chinese philosophy.

School life can seem far removed from the spiritual principles expounded by past prophets, however, and the task of the RE teacher can be complex, given the magnitude and diversity of religion, the ongoing vicissitudes of educational policy, and changing religious demographics. The late Professor Terence Copley (2005) noted that to negotiate religion in the contemporary classroom was a ‘tightrope walk’ for teachers, requiring a very finely tuned sensitivity to young people and to religion.

Given the potential of RE as a vehicle for character education, and the importance of the role of the teacher to both RE and character education, there is fertile and uncharted ground for research and intervention. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues is therefore conducting a project concerning the lives of RE teachers.

The project will engage with RE teachers in order to examine the role of virtue in their professional practice, and the potential of RE for character education. In addition to how teachers form the qualities of character to negotiate problems in the classroom, we are also interested in how being an RE teacher affects teachers’ own personal development. Previous research about religious educators has tended to consider their professional identities as primarily performative (i.e. what they choose to do in their professional role). We are concerned more with the formation of the self in a deeper sense, and the reciprocal relationships between the personal and professional.

In order to begin to answer some of these big questions the study comprises two phases. The first of these involves in-depth interviews with volunteer RE teachers about the course of their life and their beliefs and attitudes towards both religion and religious education. The second is a large scale questionnaire which will follow-up some of the findings of the first phase, including some active questions designed to assess RE teachers’ approaches to various common classroom dilemmas.

Please visit the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues [website](#) for the project overview and updates. If you are an RE teacher and wish to take part in the research, or you would otherwise like to contact the project researchers, please email Daniel Moulin-Stožek (d.p.j.moulin-stozek@bham.ac.uk) or Jason Metcalfe (j.m.metcalfe@bham.ac.uk).

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